

SATURDAY, JUNE 8, 1996

A HISTORY LESSON TO REMEMBER

Reshaping FDR's image

Students want true memorial

By JOHN MOONEY
Staff Writer

As part of a lesson on Franklin D. Roosevelt this spring, Palisades Park teacher Sherry Sabin mentioned to her sixth-graders that the planned FDR Memorial in Washington wouldn't depict the late president in a wheelchair.

And that got under her budding historians' skin.

"We were really upset," said 12-year-old Allison Malik. "They weren't showing who FDR really was."

The borough's only link to FDR may be the street that bears his name, but the Lindbergh School class decided to join what has become a national debate over the true legacy of America's most-famous disabled figure.

The students launched a letter-writing campaign to practically any national politician with an address, fanned out into the community with a petition, and raised \$300 to start a fund to fight the memorial plans.

On Friday, the class crowded into the principal's outer office to talk by phone with leaders of the National Organization on Disability, the chief critic of the memorial plans. The group's president, Alan Reich, plans to visit Lindbergh on June 18.

"It's impressive that the Lindbergh sixth-graders are taking the lead in mobilizing their school, their community, and even the nation on an issue of national and lasting importance," said Michael DeLand, the organization's chairman.

The Palisades Park class is the first school group in the country to join a debate that has already drawn some pretty high-flying figures.

At issue are the plans for a \$55 million memorial on the Washington Mall depicting FDR and his era.



DON SMITH/STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER

Palisades Park sixth-grader Allison Malik talking on the phone with advocates for the disabled about the FDR Memorial, as her classmates and teacher listen in.

Slated to open in early 1997, the seven-acre site will include three statues of the late president, but none in the wheelchair where he spent much of his life after being stricken by polio in 1921.

The decision has drawn fire not only from disability leaders, but also from former President Bush and several of FDR's grandchildren. President Clinton has said he hopes the memorial will find a place for FDR's disability.

The FDR Memorial Commission defends the plans, saying it would be inaccurate to depict a disability that FDR himself hid from the public with the help of a compliant press.

In Palisades Park, this is a perspective not lost on the teenagers. Nick Elenis, 12, walked up to a disabled woman in a store recently and asked her if she would want to be shown in a wheelchair. "She said, 'No.'"

But 11-year-old Pierre Bertran has an aunt who is disabled and, he said, often depressed about her physical shortcomings.

"If they show FDR with a disability, it might encourage others to feel that they can do something for themselves," Bertran said.

This isn't some politically correct cause with these preteens. Blue-collar Palisades Park is no bastion of bleeding hearts. To this unfettered bunch, it's just common sense.

"Even though he had a disability, he was a really good president," said sixth-grader Jenalyn Rivera. "It didn't affect his mind."

The class' teachers could only smile. When it's tough enough to get kids to listen these these days, it's more than heartening to see them turn a history lesson into one on grassroots civics.

"This is democracy in action, isn't it?" said Sabin.